



HISTORICAL EXHIBITION PRESENTED BY THE GERMAN BUNDESTAG

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### **The political parties in the Weimar Republic**

The **German National People's Party** (*Deutsch-Nationale Volkspartei – DNVP*), representing the conservative monarchist camp, campaigned against the democratic system and the international order established by the Treaty of Versailles. The DNVP defended the economic and social interests of the large landowners in the area to the east of the River Elbe as well as the interests of the industrial magnates. After initially engaging in limited cooperation, the party became more radical under the chairmanship of Alfred Hugenberg, who cultivated its anti-republican and anti-Semitic tendencies and, through cooperation with the NSDAP in the Harzburg Front, made Hitler acceptable to the bourgeois Right. The coalition government of the DNVP and NSDAP that took office in January 1933 under the chancellorship of Adolf Hitler marked the end of multi-party democracy and the beginning of National Socialist tyranny.

The **German Democratic Party** (*Deutsche Demokratische Partei – DDP*), was the product of a merger between the Progressive People's Party (*Fortschrittliche Volkspartei – FVP*) and the left wing of the National Liberals. The DDP upheld the democratic order and played a very influential part in the formulation of the Weimar Constitution. The party, which drew much of its support from middle-class intellectuals and small traders, called for the strict separation of church and state, the restriction of government regulation of the economy and the abolition of economic monopolies and sought a fair balance between the interests of capital and labour. The DDP supported the creation of a League of Nations. In the National Assembly of 1919/20 it was part of the Weimar Coalition with the SPD and the Centre Party and participated in almost every government until 1932. The willingness of the DDP to make unpopular compromises cost it dearly. After winning almost a fifth of the vote (17.3%) in 1919, it rapidly lost support. Despite joining ranks with the Young Teutonic Order (*Jungdeutscher Orden*) to form the German State Party, it saw its vote dwindle to the level of an insignificant splinter party at about one per cent by the 1930s.

The **German People's Party** (*Deutsche Volkspartei – DVP*), which was formed from the right wing of the National Liberals and parts of the Progressive People's Party, was indifferent to hostile in its attitude to the new state. As the party of heavy industry, it primarily represented the interests of the upper and merchant classes. Its politics were still strongly rooted in authoritarianism, and it advocated the establishment of a strong central government. In the field of foreign policy, it sought a revision of the Treaty of Versailles. Under the chairmanship of Gustav Stresemann, the DVP came to terms with the democratic system and switched to a policy of accommodation with the victorious powers. The rise of anti-parliamentary forces within the party after Stresemann's death and its convergence with the right-wing nationalist opposition could do nothing to prevent a steady decline in the electoral appeal of the DVP from 10% of the vote in the Reichstag election of 1920 to about one per cent in the 1930s.

The **Centre Party** (*Zentrumspartei* or *Zentrum*) regarded itself as the political voice of the Catholic population. Under the leadership of Matthias Erzberger, the Centre professed allegiance to the republican constitution and worked with the SPD and DDP in the Weimar Coalition to establish parliamentary democracy. Besides its defence of the rights of the Catholic Church and its support for the preservation of the federal states (*Länder*), the Centre was characterised by a widely diverse political platform. While its left wing favoured the development of the welfare state and international understanding, its right wing advocated a patriarchal corporative system of government at home and a revisionist foreign policy with emphasis on the defence of national interests. The Centre invariably obtained

about 15% of the vote, provided a total of five Chancellors of the *Reich* and participated in every national government until 1932. In 1930, the appointment of Heinrich Brüning of the Centre Party as Chancellor of a minority government which could only perform its duties with the support of the President marked the end of government accountability to Parliament and the beginning of a phase of quasi-parliamentary presidential government.

The **Bavarian People's Party** (*Bayerische Volkspartei – BVP*) had split from the Centre in a dispute over the party's attitude to the parliamentary system and established itself as a conservative clerical party with a regional voter base but a national mission. This particularist party was the dominant political force in Bavaria. Nationally, it aspired to participation in Centre-Right coalitions which would keep the SPD out of government. From 1930 onwards the BVP supported National Socialist participation in government.

In spite of its bitter internal conflicts at the time of the revolution, the **Social Democratic Party of Germany** (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands – SPD*) was committed to upholding the system of government. It pressed for early elections to the National Assembly and, as the strongest political force in Parliament, with 39.9% of the vote, entered government as part of the Weimar Coalition under the premiership of Philipp Scheidemann. The SPD, which remained the strongest political force until 1932, always supported and defended the Republic, despite being in opposition for most of the Weimar period, being regarded with scepticism by the Centre-Right parties and arousing the hostility of Right and Left on account of its conciliatory approach. The constant balancing act between pragmatic compromise and statesmanship on the one hand and the pursuit of a Socialist programme on the other led to internal conflicts and eventually cost it some 40% of its voters as its share of the vote finally dipped below 20% in 1933. Another relevant factor was the failure of the SPD to extend its appeal beyond its traditional working-class constituency.

The **Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany** (*Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands – USPD*) was formed in 1917 under the chairmanship of Hugo Haase from the pacifist wing of the SPD following a bitter dispute about the continued pursuit of the war. The mass strikes organised by the USPD to protest against the breakdown of the food-supply chain and the continuation of the war won the party support, particularly among Socialist members of the labour force who accused the Majority Social Democratic Party of Germany (*Mehrheitssozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands – MSPD*) of 'betraying Socialism' by cooperating with the bourgeois parties. Although the two parties agreed in November 1918 to work together in the Council of People's Representatives, the implication of the SPD in the use of force by government troops against left-wing insurgents prompted the USPD to quit the provisional government at the end of 1918. After the Spartacus League had split from the party and following its poor showing in the elections to the National Assembly, the Marxist-orientated party recovered to secure 17.9% of the vote in 1920 and become the second-largest parliamentary group in the Reichstag. Thereafter, the USPD became increasingly embroiled in internal strife. At the end of 1920, its left wing joined the KPD, and the rump of the party was reunited with the MSPD in 1922.

The **Communist Party of Germany** (*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands – KPD*) was founded by the Spartacus League, headed by Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, on 30 December 1918. The party, which had no strong roots among the population in its early days, aspired to establish a Bolshevik dictatorship based on councils which were modelled on the Russian soviets. They rejected the parliamentary system and did not stand for election to the National Assembly. Instead, they tried, through mass strikes and demonstrations, to win over supporters and defeat the forces of democracy. Weakened by internal conflicts and secessions, the KPD polled only 2.1% of the vote in the Reichstag elections of 1920. Not until the end of that year, when some 300,000 members of the left wing of the USPD defected to the KPD, did the latter start to develop into a mass party, guided by Moscow, which was able to secure the allegiance of about 10% of the electorate. The radicalisation of the political landscape in the wake of the Great Depression enabled the party to rise to third place in the Reichstag elections of 1930 to 1933. Together with the NSDAP, it constituted an obstructive anti-parliamentary majority in the Reichstag. The propaganda campaigns launched by the KPD against democracy and the 'tyranny of finance capital' played a significant part in the demise of the democratic order.

The **National Socialist German Workers' Party** (*Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei – NSDAP*) was founded in 1919 and initially drew support from the lower middle classes in Munich, who had suffered an erosion of their social status. Especially after the party chairmanship, invested with dictatorial powers, was conferred on Adolf Hitler in 1921, the NSDAP sought, through chauvinistic nationalist and anti-Semitic demonstrations and acts of violence intended as protests against the Treaty of Versailles and the 'politics of surrender' of the Weimar Republic (the 'stab-in-the-back legend'), to stir up the widespread hostility to the new political order that simmered in nationalist circles and to undermine the democratic system. Following the failed Munich Beer Hall *Putsch* of 9 November 1923, Hitler's arrest and imprisonment and a temporary ban on the party, the right-wing extremist NSDAP, which had tasted little electoral success before 1930, polling between 2.6% and 6.5% of the vote, switched to a pseudo-legal approach. The insecurity and social deprivation experienced by broad sections of the population offered considerable scope for the National Socialists' anti-Semitic and anti-capitalist agitation. In 1930 the NSDAP scored a resounding electoral success as its share of the vote rocketed to 18.3%. Now the second-largest parliamentary group in the Reichstag with 102 seats, the party was able not only to extend its subversive influence on the work of Parliament but also to enhance its own reputation among the middle classes on the right of the political spectrum. The NSDAP was perceived by more and more former supporters of the Conservative and Liberal parties, as well as by many young people and non-voters, as a fresh force which, with its racist, nationalist and collectivist ideology and its aggressive stance in the field of foreign policy, seemed capable of finding solutions to Germany's economic and political problems. In the autumn of 1931, the NSDAP, the DNVP and nationalist paramilitary associations joined forces in the Harzburg Front in order to step up the fight against parliamentary democracy. The destabilisation policies pursued by the NSDAP and the KPD led to a rapid succession of governments without parliamentary majorities that could only rule with the aid of presidential decrees and to the recurrence of general elections at brief intervals. Finally, the National Socialists had consolidated their position of power to such an extent that President Paul von Hindenburg, partly under pressure from right-wing Conservative circles and in spite of a decline in the NSDAP vote in the last democratic election to the Reichstag, appointed Hitler to serve as Chancellor of a coalition government of NSDAP and DNVP, thereby dealing the death blow to the sorely beleaguered parliamentary democracy of the Weimar Republic.

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